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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT ON METIS WOMEN: A STUDY OF KATHERENA VERMETTE'S *THE BREAK*

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Abstract:
Childhood is a period of fun and laughter. It is a crucial period of a human being's life, since the basic foundation of a person's psyche is laid during childhood. The experiences during the childhood play a prominent role in moulding and shaping the personality, attitude and character of a person. Not every child is blessed with a happy childhood. Some undergo traumatic experiences during their childhood which has an adverse effect on their adult life. This paper aims at exploring the impact of childhood trauma on the minds of the Metis women of Canada, through a study of KatherenaVermette's novel The Break, applying Psychodynamic Theory. The novel revolves around four generations of Metis women and their struggle in life. According to Olive Patricia Dickason, "the term Metis is used in its French sense, mixture, usually applied to the crossing of human races without specifying which ones" (xvi). The Metis are an indigenous tribe of Canada, who suffer from marginalisation, unemployment, poverty and most of the youngsters are addicted to alcohol and drugs. The plight of the women is worse, since they are subjected to physical assault and even murder by their perpetrators. Some of the Metis children are subjected to traumatic events like natural disaster, domestic violence, accident or death, during their childhood and suffer from its adverse effect which affects their social behaviour and outlook. "Trauma is an increasingly popular notion to indicate shocking, terrifying or overwhelming events and processes that have or likely have destructive effects on people's psyche and their relation to their surrounding world" (Richters 256).

Key Words: *Traumatic experiences, psychodynamic theory, indigenous, physical assault.*

KatherenaVermette was born on 29th January 1977, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, which is densely populated by indigenous people of Canada. She has completed her Masters in Fine Arts from University of British Columbia. The unnatural loss of her older brother, at the age of fourteen and the total apathy of the police since they were indigenous, left an indelible mark on her mind. The incident turned Vermette into an advocate of the indigenous people and she lent her voice for the justice and equality for her people. Being a poet, essayist and novelist, she voiced out her anguish for her people through her works. Her works are *North End Love Songs* (2012), *The Seven Teachings Stories* (2015),*The Break* (2016) and *Pemmican Wars: A Girl Called Echo*(2017). She is the recipient of Governor General's Literary Award for poetry for *North End Love Songs*, Canada Council for the Arts (2013), Burt Award for the novel *The Break* (2017).

The novel *The Break* traces the life of the matriarchal Metis woman, known as Kookom or Grandma in Cree, and her next three generations. The novel begins with Stella witnessing a physical assault, which takes placeduring a winter evening, in isolated grassland and proceeds with a suspense regarding the crime. It unfolds the story of Kookom's family and their struggle to cope up with the assault committed on Emily, one of Kookom's great-grandchild. The novel unfurls the emotional trauma experienced by the family and also unfolds the story of the perpetrator, Phoenix, who had committed the crime or the assault. It portrays the anguish, poverty, loneliness and mental agony of the Metis women.

Psychodynamic theory was initiated by Freud, and psychoanalysts Carl Gustav Jung, Alfred Adler

and Erik Erikson made their own contributions to it. Psychodynamic theory states that the events of a person's childhood remains in the subconscious mind, and has a great influence on shaping the personality and life during adulthood. The natural urges and the various conflicts that take place during childhood, modify the behaviour and attitude of the adult. Freud can be considered to be the first theorist to highlight the importance of the childhood mental health, for the formation of a perfect society. The theory can be applied to the four characters in the novel, Stella, Phoenix, Elsie and Emily, who undergo traumatic experiences in their childhood, which has a deep impact on their behavioural pattern and attitude towards the society.

Stella, who had lost her mother, Rain, at a very young age, grows under the care of Kookom. Even though her aunt and cousins do not reveal the nature of her mother's death, she learns about the physical assault on Rain and her subsequent death on the isolated street, from the newspapers. "To lose a mother is one of the most difficult things to go through by any means…"(Anderson, 23) and the death of her mother creates a sense of insecurity right from her school age. "As a grown up Stella knew her mom was an addict" (Vermette, 264) and feels that Rain was a failure as a mother, and that her addiction has caused her the unnatural death. When Stella witnesses the assault, which takes place a few yards away from her house, she is reminded of her mother's death, which makes her petrified and does not venture out to help the victim. Vermette explains that "Stella stood there, staring at the back of the door, unable to open it. She paused there, remembering something she hadn't thought of in a long time" (172).She is griped with fear that if she dies, her children would become an orphan. The loss of her mother and her sense of insecurity makes her over anxious and over protective of her children. Hence, she does not go out to help the victim, who was assaulted in the dark by three or four figures. Stella remains to be a dedicated mother throughout the novel, but is also constantly driven by a sense of guilt for not helping the victim. The emotional traumatic experience of losing her mother at a young age, turns her into an over-anxious, insecure woman and an over protective parent.

Elsie, who was Stella's best friend in school, was a cheerful and energetic youngster. She grew under the care of her grandparents, since her parents were divorced. When Stella and Elsie were in their sixth grade they attend a weekend party for youngsters. Elsie, who had been deprived of love at home front, falls in love with a ninth grade student, but the youngster and his friends brutally gang rape Elsie, in the party. Beverly Jacob sympathises that, at the time of assault,"the victim loses her voice and feels that she does not have any control of the situation during the abuse"(30). The trauma of rape sends Elsie into a state of deep shock,"her eyes looked dead" (204), and brings about an avalanche of changes in her life. The rape causes early pregnancy, resulting in Emily becoming a school dropout, and landing at the social home for pregnant girls, where gives birth to a child named Phoenix. The cruel trauma at a young age destroys Elsie's life, turning her into a drug addict as an adult. She "becomes an alcoholic who has to earn her living through prostitution" (Sandten 310), leads a dejected life and is unable to care for her children, two more of whom she begets through prostitution. Her youngest child Sparrow dies and her second daughter Cedar-Sage is confiscated by the Children's Aid Society, to be placed in a foster home. Her eldest daughter Phoenix, turns into a drug addict, and is sent away by the government to Centre for reformation for children. The trauma of separation from her parents and the brutal rape makes Elsie's a drug addict and a social outcast. Psychiatrist Dr. Judith Herman notes that "traumatized people who cannot spontaneously dissociate may attempt to produce similar numbing effects by using alcohol or narcotics" (44). Elsie becomes an epitome of failure, turns to drugs to escape from shame and her sense of guilt, but "only ended up feeling numb and depressed"(Campbell 118), thus getting caught in a vicious cycle.

Phoenix, the daughter of Elsie, undergoes the emotional trauma of watching the disintegration of her drug addict mother, separation from her siblings and leading a life of poverty, neglect, loneliness and misery, during her childhood. The trauma takes a heavy toll on her mind, and she turns out to be a school dropout, drug addict and an alcoholic. Psychologists' believe that "alcohol and drug abuse often is the

result of emotional problems such as depression" (Zionts 28). She develops a sense of anger and hatred towards the society, especially the affluent, as a result of her helplessness against poverty. Phoenix indulges in juvenile crimes and is sent to the centre for reformation for Juveniles. Her disturbed childhood makes her destructive and violent in nature. She blames her mother for the loss of her siblings and poverty, and thus hates her bitterly. Her loneliness and longing for love makes her fall in love with Clayton, a fifteen year old school student. She develops a relationship with him, ends up with teenage pregnancy and remains secretive about it. When Clayton displays his interest for the thirteen year old Emily, his school-mate, Phoenix turns violent with possessiveness and loathes the well-to-do Emily. She views Emily as a threat to her opportunity, to establish a family with Clayton, and this makes her vehement and destructive. Phoenix, who is psychologically affected with failure, lack of family support, loneliness, anger and jealousy, brutally attacks Emily with a beer bottle and turns into a fugitive. Psychiatrist Dr. Sandra L. Bloom points out that, "many perpetrators of criminal violence have had serious childhood traumatic experiences"(Bloom 62) and thus Phoenix commits a brutal act. Phoenix is hunted down by the police, arrested, and charged with sexual assault. When her mother Elsie comes to visit her in the prison, Phoenix "doesn't want to look at her ... She doesn't want to feel sorry for her, or feel anything for her"(323). She regards her mother with hatred and disrespect. Phoenix, who is a victim of childhood trauma, is determined to take care of her son and to give him a life that she never had. The traumatic experiences of her childhood literally turn her into a violent criminal, alcoholic and drug addict. The innocent child, who had witnessed trauma at a young age, turns into a violent offender of law and her sense of despair, anger, and helplessness turn her into a bully in the social structure. The social behavioural pattern of Phoenix terms her as a threat to the society. Phoenix is a perfect example for the impact of childhood trauma and its adverse effects on an adult.

Emily, a girl of thirteen, who has a safe and secured childhood, is suddenly pitted against a violent offender of law, Phoenix, who physically assaults her with a beer bottle. Emily, who is hospitalised, is made to undergo secondary trauma every time, when the police officers question her regarding the assault. The officers presume that Emily was sexually assaulted by men, taking the nature of crime into consideration, but Emily, who is driven by a sense of shame, does not reveal the fact that she was assaulted by a girl. "Rape is inherently violence against the individual's physical integrity" (Mibenge 155) and cruelty against the psyche. Though Emily's physical wounds cure, her mental agony makes her weak and "everything seems to make her cry" (305). By the end of the novel we find a considerable change in the character of Emily, who becomes withdrawn, mentally fragile, physically weak and more oriented towards her family for support, love and hope.

Every single action in a child's life by the society, contributes to the psychological traits of the child, and hence, the society is indirectly responsible for every single action of the child. Life plays a major role on the child's psyche and "if life gives them agony to play with, the games of the children will be cruel jokes on the people who chart their lives" (Maracle, 45).

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